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Sudan: The Crisis in Darfur

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Summary

The ongoing crisis in Darfur Province in western Sudan has raised serious concerns about a major humanitarian disaster, with an estimated one million people displaced and more than 140,000 people forced into neighboring Chad. There are no reliable estimates of the number of people killed as a result of the conflict. The government of Sudan has denied or severely restricted access to relief officials in Darfur. Some observers and U.S. officials estimate that between 10,000-30,000 people have been killed over the past twelve months. U.S. officials assert that an estimated 320,000 could die by the end of 2004 irrespective of the international response. This report will be updated as developments warrant.

The Crisis in Darfur

Background. The crisis in Darfur began in February 2003, when two rebel groups emerged to challenge the National Islamic Front (NIF) government in Darfur. The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) claim that the government of Sudan discriminates against Muslim African ethnic groups in Darfur. The government of Sudan dismisses the SLA and JEM as terrorists. The conflict pits the three African ethnic groups, the Fur, Zaghawa, and Massaleit, against nomadic Arab ethnic groups. Periodic tensions between the largely African-Muslim ethnic groups and the Arab inhabitants of Darfur can be traced to the 1930s and most recently surfaced in the 1980s. Successive governments in Khartoum have long neglected the African ethnic groups in Darfur and have done very little to prevent or contain attacks by Arab militias against non-Arabs in Darfur.¹ Non-Arab groups took up arms against successive central governments in Khartoum, albeit unsuccessfully. In the early 1990s, the NIF government, which came to power in 1989, began to arm Arab militias and disarm the largely African ethnic groups.

The Current Crisis. At the core of the current conflict is a struggle for control of resources. The largely nomadic Arab ethnic groups often venture into the traditionally

¹ International Crisis Group (ICG). *Darfur Rising: Sudan's New Crisis*. March 25, 2004.

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farming communities of Darfur for water and grazing, often triggering armed conflict between the two groups. Darfur is home to an estimated 7 million people and has more than 30 ethnic groups, although these groups fall into two major categories: African and Arab. Both communities are Muslim, and years of intermarriages have made racial distinctions impossible. Fighting over resources is one of several factors that has led to intense infighting in Darfur over the years. Many observers believe that the NIF government has systematically and deliberately pursued a policy of discrimination against and marginalization of the African communities in Darfur, and has given support to the Arab militia to suppress non-Arabs, whom it considers a threat to its hold on power. In 2000, with the ouster of the founder of the NIF, Hassan al-Turabi, and a split within the Islamist Movement, the government imposed a state of emergency and used its new authority to crack down on dissidents in Darfur. By 2002, a little known self defense force of a largely Fur-dominated group emerged as the SLA, challenging government forces in Darfur.

With the NIF regime internally in turmoil and mounting international pressure to end the North-South conflict, the SLA and JEM were able to gain the upper hand in the initial phase of the conflict against government forces in early 2003, and appear well prepared and armed. The rebels also enjoyed the support of the local population as well as officers and soldiers in the Sudanese army. A significant number of senior officers and soldiers in the Sudanese armed forces comes from Darfur. The SLA benefitted from outside support, including from fellow Zaghawa in Chad and financial support from Darfur businessmen in the Persian Gulf. The government of Sudan has accused Eritrea and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) of providing support to the SLA. The government of Sudan also accuses the founder of the NIF, Hassan al-Turabi, of having links with JEM. Some observers say that Turabi, through his supporters, provides political and financial support to JEM. In late March 2004, Turabi, along with a number of senior army officers, was arrested. The government claimed that Turabi was behind an attempted coup, although officials in Khartoum seemed to back away from that claim by mid-April 2004.

The Military Campaign and Human Rights Abuses. In mid-2003, the government of Sudan significantly increased its presence in Darfur by arming the Arab militia, the Janjaweed, and by deploying the Popular Defense Force (PDF). The Janjaweed, under the direction of regular government forces, reportedly unleashed a campaign of terror against civilians.² The Arab militia engaged in what United Nations officials described as “ethnic cleansing” of the African ethnic groups of Darfur. Men have been summarily executed, women have been raped, and more than 100,000 have been forced into exile in neighboring countries.³ In early February 2004, the government launched a major military offensive against the rebel forces, and by mid-February 2004, President Omar Bashir, in a nationally televised speech, declared that the security forces had crushed the SLA and JEM, and offered amnesty to the rebels.

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR). *Report of UNHCHR Mission to Chad*, April 2004.

³ Office of UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan. *A Briefing Paper on the Darfur Crisis: Ethnic Cleansing*. March 25, 2004.

The forceful expulsion of the mainly African ethnic groups from their homes was done in a deliberate, sequenced, and systematic way, according to a briefing paper on the Darfur crisis by the Office of U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sudan. The report describes the mechanisms used to cleanse the area of non-Arabs by “total disengagement of administration and suspension of all government services.” These include suspending most government functions, including payment of salaries to government workers, and abandoning basic government services, such as health care and law enforcement. According to the United Nations, once government officials leave these communities, the people are then accused of being rebel sympathizers and are targeted by government militias. The Janjaweed burn villages, loot the properties of the non-Arabs, abduct children, rape women, and prevent people from returning to their homes.⁴

Negotiations and the Cease-Fire Agreement

In September 2003, the government of Sudan and the SLA signed a cease-fire agreement mediated by President Deby of Chad. The agreement collapsed in December 2003. In early April 2004, the government of Sudan and the SLA/JEM agreed to a cease-fire and political dialogue to peacefully resolve the conflict. The government of Sudan agreed to negotiate with the rebels after considerable international pressure. The negotiations were conducted under the auspices of President Idriss Deby of Chad and assisted by the African Union. The United States and other international participants played an important

role in facilitating the negotiations, although the government of Sudan delegation walked out of the talks in protest when the head of the U.S. delegation began to deliver his opening remarks.

Highlights of the Cease-Fire Agreement (4/8/2004)

The parties agreed to:

- Find a political solution to the problem.
- Cease all hostile media campaigns.
- Accept a 45-day cease-fire (renewed in May 2004).
- Establish a Cease-fire Commission and a Joint Commission.
- Free all political prisoners.
- Control their allies and ensure compliance with the agreement.
- Facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The parties agreed to observe a cease-fire for a period of 45 days, renewable automatically if both parties agree. In late May, the parties renewed the ceasefire agreement. The agreement appears to be holding, although the government of Sudan was accused of violating the agreement.⁵ Nevertheless, the humanitarian situation in Darfur, according to many observers, continues to deteriorate, largely due to repeated and deliberate denial of access for NGOs to the affected areas by government officials. Moreover, monitoring mechanisms agreed to by the parties are yet to be implemented, and

⁴ Flint, Julie. “Refugees Executed in Desert of Sudan.” *The Observer*, April 25, 2004.

⁵ BBC Online [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3631785.stm>]. *Darfur Peace Talks Threatened*. April 16, 2004.

many observers fear that continued delay could unravel the cease-fire agreement. As part of the agreement, the African Union, with the help of the United States and the European Union, was tasked to deploy a monitoring team in Darfur and establish a Joint Commission, consisting of the two parties, Chad, and the international community. American and European Union officials argue that the monitoring team must be independent and credible.

The International Community's Response

The international community's response to the Darfur crisis has been slow and ineffective, in part because of the government of Sudan's repeated refusal to allow relief workers into Darfur. It was not until late 2003, almost one year after the crisis erupted, that some members of the international community began to speak about gross human rights abuses and a widespread humanitarian crisis in Darfur. According to some analysts, the Bush Administration did not consider the Darfur crisis as a priority; instead the Administration was largely focused on the talks between the government of Sudan and the SPLM. The first statement on Darfur by the White House was issued in early April 2004. Others point out that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) officials spoke of a growing humanitarian crisis and visited the area in late 2003.

Administration officials were reportedly concerned that forceful statements or measures against the government of Sudan could undermine the peace process between the GOS and the SPLM. Some U.N. officials, however, have been forceful in their statements and have publicly expressed concerns about the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Darfur. The United Nations Resident Humanitarian Coordinator consistently reported to headquarters about gross human rights violations in Darfur. In a letter dated March 22, 2004 to the State Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sudan, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator, Mukesh Kapila, wrote that "the war in Darfur started off in a small way last year but it has progressively got worse. A predominant feature of this is that the brunt is being borne by civilians. This includes vulnerable women and children...The violence in Darfur appears to be particularly directed at a specific group based on their ethnic identity and appears to be

Conclusions: Report of OHCHR Mission to Chad (April 5-15, 2004)

The mission was able to identify disturbing patterns of massive human rights violations in Darfur, many of which constitute war crimes and/or crimes against humanity. According to information collected from refugees, it appears that there is a reign of terror in Darfur the following elements of which should be highlighted:

- (a) Repeated attacks on civilians by government of Sudan military and its proxy militia forces with a view of their displacement;
- (b) The use of systematic and discriminate aerial bombardments and ground attacks on unarmed civilians;
- (c) The use of disproportionate force by the government of Sudan and Janjaweed forces;
- (d) That the Janjaweed have operated with total impunity and in close coordination with the forces of the government of Sudan;
- (e) The attacks appear to have been ethnically based with groups targeted being essentially the following tribes reportedly of African origin: Zaghawa, Masaalit, and Furs. Men and young boys appear to have been particularly targeted in ground attacks; and
- (f) The pattern of attacks on civilians includes killing, rape, pillage, including of livestock, and destruction of property, including water resources.

systemized. This it is akin to ethnic cleansing.” The African Union and the Arab League did not make public statements on the Darfur crisis until the signing of the cease-fire agreement.

In late April 2004, the United Nations Human Rights Commission expressed its views on the Darfur situation by adopting a Chairman’s Statement supported by the overwhelming majority of Commission members. The statement was adopted with 50 in favor, one against (U.S.), and two abstentions (Australia and Ukraine). The U.S. delegation sought, unsuccessfully, a stronger resolution on Darfur. Two amendments offered by the United States were defeated, while a motion to suspend further discussion on a U.S.-supported draft resolution was approved by members of the Commission. The European Union, led by France, and the African Group voted for a statement that simply expressed concerns about conditions in Darfur. Meanwhile, the release of a highly critical Commission report on human rights conditions in Darfur was delayed in order to secure access for a U.N. delegation to Darfur. The report, however, was leaked to the public, although it was not made available to Commission members during the debate on Sudan.⁶ A U.N. official later stated that it was better to delay the release of the report and secure access to the region than to inflame the situation.

Highlights of the April 2004 U.N. Human Rights Commission Text on Sudan

The Commission:

- Expressed deep concern the about human rights situation in Darfur.
- Decided to appoint an Independent Expert on human rights for a period of one year.
- Called upon the parties to observe the cease-fire agreement.
- Called on the parties to provide unhindered access for humanitarian assistance.
- Welcomed the government of Sudan’s decision for allowing a U.N. delegation to visit the country.

The U.S. delegation in Geneva had called for a Special Rapporteur for Sudan to investigate human rights abuses. In a speech before the Commission, the leader of the U.S. delegation, Ambassador Richard Williamson, argued that “The resolution should call upon the Sudanese Government to stop the events.” He asserted that the government of Sudan had refused access to Darfur. The representative of the Republic of Congo, speaking for the African Group, argued that “The African Group remained extremely concerned by the human rights situation in the Sudan and the draft text would reflect all the efforts possible that had been made.” Meanwhile, the delegate from Ireland, speaking on behalf of the European Union, stated that the European Union “was concerned over the human rights situation in Darfur.” The Cuban delegate stated that “the cooperation of the government of Sudan in an attempt to solve the situation is applauded.”⁷ Human rights groups and U.S. officials criticized the Chairman’s Statement as being too weak on the government of Sudan. The U.S. delegation declared at the end of the session in April that Washington will demand a Special Session of the Commission to discuss the

⁶ Evans, Robert. *Reign of Terror Seen in UN Darfur Report*. Reuters. April 21, 2004.

⁷ Commission on Human Rights. *Concerns Over Human Rights Situation in Western Sudan*. April 23, 2004.

situation in Darfur again. A majority of Commission members must support a motion for a Special Session of the Commission to be held.

A United Nations delegation was allowed to visit Darfur in late April 2004 to examine humanitarian conditions in that region. The head of the delegation, James Morris, Executive Director of the U.N. World Food Program (WFP), stated that conditions in Darfur are desperate. At a press conference in Khartoum, Morris stated that “malnutrition rates among children are soaring and few if any are going to school and this pattern appears to be repeated across Darfur.” Morris declared that his delegation witnessed human devastation and that his delegation “received numerous reports of sexual abuse and harassment that has limited people’s access to water, food and firewood.”⁸ Observers fear that the government of Sudan may have attempted to remove evidence that might implicate its allies. According to press reports, a number of potential witnesses to atrocities were executed in late April. Moreover, the government reportedly issued regular army uniforms to the Janjaweed militia to protect them from prosecution. Some leaders of the Janjaweed were reportedly relocated to other parts of Sudan outside Darfur.

The Humanitarian Situation and the U.S. Response

According to United Nations and U.S. officials, the situation in Darfur is considered one of the worst current humanitarian and human rights crisis in the world. Out of a population of 7 million people, one million are internally displaced, over 140,000 have been forced into exile, and tens of thousands of civilian have been killed. Since February 2003, USAID has provided an estimated \$100 million in humanitarian assistance for Darfur, and the Bush Administration pledged an additional \$188 million in early June 2004. USAID has also established a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) for Darfur, although the government of Sudan delayed the deployment of the team to Darfur for several weeks. The government of Sudan has accused USAID of being too sympathetic to the rebels. Meanwhile, humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate, in large part because of continued government restrictions. According to USAID, “due to GOS impediments that block travel permits and relief operations in Darfur, humanitarian access to vulnerable populations outside of the state capitals of Geneina, Al-Fashir, and Nyala is extremely limited, and access to many areas is completely denied.”⁹ And according to Doctors Without Borders, “because of the lack of appropriate, urgently needed aid, the health of displaced people in Sudan’s Darfur region—particularly children—is radically worsening.”¹⁰ The House International Relations Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held several hearings on Sudan and the crisis in Darfur. In 2004, Congress passed several resolutions on Sudan and the crisis in Darfur.¹¹

⁸ Sudan Tribune. *United Nations Demand Better Security, Access to Humanitarian Aid Workers in Western Sudan*. May 2, 2004.

⁹ USAID. *Sudan Complex Emergency*, June 2004.

¹⁰ Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). *Measles and Malnutrition Increasing in Sudan’s Darfur Region*. April 28, 2004.

¹¹ For more, see CRS Issue Brief IB98043.